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SUBJECT: VATICAN: PUTIN'S VISIT MAINLY CEREMONIAL

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Vatican officials told us March 1 that President Putin's March 13 visit to Pope Benedict XVI (ref a) would be a short "get-acquainted" session, as it would be the first meeting between the two men. No meeting had yet been scheduled for Putin with Cardinal Secretary of State Bertone. Officials were fairly upbeat about the Holy See's relationship with Russia, downplaying previous controversy over visa issuances for Catholic priests. Officials were similarly positive about Catholic-Russian Orthodox (ROC) relations, pointing to several recent "small gestures" that had contributed to improved relations. They also commented on the republication of a 1993 document that should also help improve ties between the two sides. An emotional split in the ROC synod on relations between the two Churches is a remaining obstacle. With Catholic-ROC relations looking up, the Holy See will most likely be content with a light, feel-good visit from the Russian, even if some officials may not be enthusiastic about all of his domestic or foreign policy. End summary.

Get-Acquainted Session

[1](#)2. (C) Holy See MFA Country Director for Russia Julio Murat told us March 1 that Russian President Putin's expected visit to Pope Benedict XVI March 13 (ref a) would likely be a short "get-acquainted" session that didn't delve deeply into sensitive issues. Russian DCM Pavel Dyukarev explained to us that Putin had been planning to attend a Government of Italy event in Bari (Southern Italy), and only later decided to stop in Rome to see other Italian officials, including President Napolitano. Murat said that Holy See knows that the stop at the Vatican was somewhat of an "add-on" to the meetings with the Italians. Still, Murat looked forward to Putin's first visit to the Vatican after Benedict's election, and the chance for the two to develop relations. "Clearly, there is a lot to talk about," Murat said. He said that currently no meeting had been scheduled with Cardinal Secretary of State Bertone.

Upbeat on Relations

13. (C) Murat was fairly upbeat about the Holy See's relationship with Russia. He said the issues surrounding visas for Catholic priests ministering to the Catholic community in Russia that had been an irritant in relations in the past were no longer a major issue. He took a milder line than we have heard from Vatican officials in the past, saying that past problems had often been the fault of local officials, rather than a coordinated attempt by the national government to persecute Catholic priests. He even went so far as to say that the priests themselves had sometimes exacerbated problems by failing to take care of administrative requirements in a timely manner. Murat mentioned that "a couple" of proposed laws in Russia might impact Church finances and could turn out to be problematic. For now, however, the Holy See was not overly concerned.

Catholic - Orthodox Relations

14. (C) Turning to Catholic-Russian Orthodox (ROC) relations, Murat said that in meetings he has attended, Russian officials typically try to stay out of the religious realm. Even so, it is a relationship that colors nearly every aspect of Holy See-Russia ties. Murat and Fr. Milan Zust, point man at the Vatican for relations with the Orthodox, were generally upbeat about relations between the two Churches. Zust pointed to several recent "small gestures" that had contributed to a warmer atmosphere between the Catholics and Orthodox in Russia, among them recent meetings between ecumenical groups and a Catholic donation that helped rebuild a burnt ROC church. Both sides, he said, were looking forward to the resumption of the wider Catholic Orthodox dialogue at the upcoming September 2007 meeting in Romania.

15. (C) Zust said that while traditional Orthodox complaints about alleged Catholic proselytism were unlikely to fade away entirely, there had been few hot controversies of late. We asked about reports in Vatican-based media about the republication of a 1993 letter to Catholic clergy and institutions in Russia that is now being recirculated to the same recipients. The letter recognizes the ROC's right to

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spread Christianity in traditionally Orthodox areas, and calls for Catholic clergy to act "not in a contentious or sectarian spirit". Zust was quick to point out that the letter was nothing new - even the original version in 1993 was drawn from texts from the documents of the Catholic Church's decades-old Second Vatican Council. Still, a fresh imprimatur from the Holy See and the Vatican's leading official on ecumenism had created optics that both Zust and Murat agreed could help relations.

16. (C) To make further progress in relations, Murat noted, the ROC would have to address the emotional split in the ROC synod on the issue. According to Murat, some of the hottest ROC opponents of the relationship had cooled somewhat after the death of Pope John Paul, who for reasons of nationality and history had raised their fear and ire. But he warned that there were still some hard-liners who would not accept a warming of relations.

Papal Meeting?

17. (C) The perennial question in Catholic-ROC relations is the possibility of a meeting between Pope Benedict and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II. In the past, Zust, has joked that he gets a new rumor about a proposed meeting at a "neutral site" nearly every week. The media is buzzing about this once again in conjunction with the Putin visit. DCM Dyukarev repeated to us what Putin has said before: he would be happy to welcome the pope to Moscow, but the issue is one for the two Churches to work out. Murat said he thought a meeting at a third location would occur eventually, but could not say when. No one with

whom we spoke thought that the Putin visit would lead directly to a Benedict-Alexei summit.

Kyrill Coming?

18. (C) There had been some rumors in the diplomatic community that Alexei's foreign affairs chief, Metropolitan Kyrill of the Moscow Patriarchate would be a member of Putin's delegation. Russian DCM Dyukarev said the delegation was not set yet, but wouldn't rule out the possibility of Kyrill coming. He noted that Bari had traditional ties to the Orthodox Church and that its cathedral of Saint Nicholas was a place of pilgrimage for many Russian Orthodox, as the saint is much revered in the East. Vatican source Zust said he had heard that Kyrill was coming - and then that he wasn't. He said that on balance he didn't think he would be part of the delegation.

Comment

19. (C) As things currently stand, the Putin visit figures to be more of a photo-op than an issues-oriented encounter. We spoke to Murat about Putin's recent criticism of U.S. foreign policy and Russian threats against potential European partners in proposed missile-defense plans. We also probed Holy See thinking on human rights issues in Russia. Murat didn't engage much, repeating conventional wisdom that Russia was trying to reassert itself on the world stage, perhaps emboldened by its clout in energy markets. Murat's seemingly soft line on Russia is notable in tandem with the improved atmosphere in Catholic-ROC relations on Zust's watch. Zust, a Slovene with a softer line than his Polish predecessor (ref b), has by most accounts made good strides at the working level with his ROC counterparts. While some Vatican officials may not be enthusiastic about human rights or other issues in Putin's Russia, the Holy See will most likely be content with a feel-good visit from the Russian that doesn't upset recent progress with the ROC - a priority of Pope Benedict XVI.
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